ISOTOPE

by Pierre Akume

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FADE IN:

SCENE 1

EXT. ABUJA ESTATE - DAY

A series of aerial shots of a high-end, gated estate in Abuja. Manicured lawns. White-painted walls. The sun is harsh, making the pavement shimmer. It looks peaceful. It looks perfect.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

> "Verbal abuse is a silent crisis in over 60% of households. Because it leaves no physical marks, it remains the most frequent and least reported form of child maltreatment."

ZARA (V.O.)
In Chemistry, you learn that every element has a breaking point. It is called Critical Pressure. You take a stable gas, you squeeze it, you starve it of space, and eventually... it turns into something else. Something dangerous.

SCENE 2

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

ZARA (24, tired eyes, wearing an old university hoodie) is standing at the sink. A mountain of greasy plates towers over her. The kitchen is

modern with marble countertops and expensive appliances.
She is scrubbing a plate. Hard.

JOYCE (50, dressed in a sharp floral housecoat, hair perfectly wrapped) enters. She does not look at Zara. She looks at the counter. She picks up a plate Zara just finished and holds it up to the light.
She rubs a thumb over the ceramic.

JOYCE
Grease.

ZARA
I used the morning fresh, Mom. I scrubbed it twice.

JOYCE
Then scrub it a third time. Your hands are soft, Zara. That is the problem. You spent four years in the University studying how to mix liquids, but you cannot even mix soap and water to clean a common plate.

Joyce drops the plate back into the soapy water. *SPLASH.* Water hits Zara's face. Zara does not flinch. She just wipes her cheek with her shoulder.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Your father is in Korea, working until his bones ache so he can pay the service charge for this estate. And you? You are here, wasting his water, wasting his soap, and producing nothing but dirty dishes.

ZARA
(Frustrated)
I sent out ten applications yesterday, Mom. I have an interview for a lab assistant role on Friday.

JOYCE
Lab assistant? 80,000 Naira? To buy what? To buy air? Your younger sister Nneka just paid the electricity bill for the whole month. Five minutes ago. While she was sitting in her room with her laptop.

Joyce moves to the fridge. She pulls out a carton of eggs and some imported sausages.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Nneka is a Software Engineer. She builds things. You? You are just a Chemist who cannot even find the right formula to be useful. Don't touch these eggs. They are for Nneka. She has a big meeting. She needs brain power. You... you can find that leftover Eba from Saturday. It is still in the green bowl.

Zara stops scrubbing. She stares at the soapy water. The reflection of her own face looks distorted in the bubbles.

ZARA (V.O.)
Pressure does not just change the state of matter. It changes the soul of it.

SCENE 3

INT. DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

NNEKA (22) sits at the table. High-end noise-canceling headphones over her ears. A MacBook Pro in front of her. She is typing fast. She looks focused, glowing in the blue light of the screen.
Joyce places a plate of steaming eggs and sausages in front of her. She strokes Nneka’s hair lovingly.

JOYCE
Eat, my daughter. You are the one carrying this house on your shoulders.

Zara walks past the dining room, holding a bowl of cold, grey Eba. She looks at the scene. Nneka does not even look up. She is in another world. A world that pays $4,000 a month.

SCENE 4

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

AUNTY BOLA (50s, wearing an expensive lace outfit and a large headtie) sits on the sofa. She is sipping a chilled malt drink.

AUNTY BOLA
But Joyce, this house is beautiful. You and David have really tried. Abuja is not easy at all.

JOYCE
It is the grace of God, my sister. And of course, my children. When you train them well, they bring the harvest home.

AUNTY BOLA
That is true. I heard Nneka is now working for a company in America?

JOYCE
Yes! A Software Engineer. They pay her in dollars, Bola. Pure dollars. She just bought a new generator for the house last week. She told me, "Mummy, I don't want you to stay in darkness for one second."

Zara walks into the living room to get her charger. She tries to be invisible.

AUNTY BOLA
Ah, Zara! My daughter. How are you?

ZARA
I am fine, Aunty. Good afternoon.

AUNTY BOLA
Good afternoon. So, what about you? I heard you finished your Chemistry degree. Which company are you working for now?

JOYCE
She is working for the Ministry of Sleeping, Bola. That is her department.

Aunty Bola lets out a forced, awkward laugh. Zara freezes.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
She spent four years studying how to mix chemicals, but now the only thing she mixes is the dust in this house. She is still waiting for a call.

AUNTY BOLA
Oh. Well, it is not easy. The country is hard.

JOYCE
The country is hard for those who do not have sense. Nneka found a job before she even finished her final exams. Zara is just... relaxed. She thinks her father will keep sending money from Korea forever.

ZARA
I'll be in my room, Aunty.

JOYCE
Yes, go. Go and continue your research on Instagram. Sometimes I wonder if they switched her in the hospital. How can one be gold and the other be lead?

Aunty Bola laughs.

AUNTY BOLA
You are funny.

SCENE 5

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - LATER

Zara is sitting on her floor, her back against the door. She pulls out her laptop. She needs to finish a certification module. She clicks Refresh.

SCREEN: *No Internet Connection.*

Zara goes to the hallway. She sees Joyce standing by the router. Joyce has the power cable in her hand.

ZARA

Mom? The Wi-Fi is off. I am in the middle of a course.

JOYCE
Nneka is taking her afternoon nap. She said the router is making a humming sound and it is disturbing her.

ZARA
The router does not make noise, Mom. I really need to finish this module so I can add it to my CV.

JOYCE
CV for what? For another rejection letter? You are wasting data that Nneka paid for. When you can pay for your own subscription, you can keep the router on for twenty four hours. For now, go and sweep the compound. The leaves are falling.

ZARA
(Angrily)
Mom, you are being inconsiderate. Why do you hate me so much? Besides, It is three p.m. It is hot outside.

JOYCE
Then the sun will help you sweat out some of that laziness. Move!

Zara stares at her mother. For a second, her eyes go dark.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Why are you looking at me like that? Do you want to hit me? Hit your mother?

Zara says nothing. She turns around and walks toward the back door.

ZARA (V.O.)
Some reactions need a spark. Others just need enough heat to melt the container.

SCENE 6

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The house is quiet except for the hum of the air conditioner. JOYCE is sitting on the sofa, holding a smartphone in front of her face. The screen is glowing.

JOYCE
(Smiling widely)
David! Ah, your face is looking smooth oh. Korea is good for you. Are you eating well?

DAVID (V.O.)
I am eating, Joyce. But the work is plenty. How are my girls?

JOYCE
Nneka is here. Nneka! Come and see your father!

NNEKA walks in, sliding her headphones around her neck. She leans into the camera.

NNEKA
Hi Daddy! I sent you the pictures of the new generator. It is working perfectly.

DAVID (V.O.)
I saw it. God bless you. You are a man in this house. What about Zara? Is she there?

Zara appears in the doorway. She has a small, hopeful smile. She moves to join the frame.

JOYCE
(Slightly tilting the phone away from Zara)
Zara is... she is around. She is fine. She is still "resting." You know how it is. After all the money we spent on her school, she has decided that her job is to follow me up and down in this house.

ZARA
(Stepping forward)
Daddy, I am right here. I applied for—

JOYCE
(Cutting her off, laughing to David)
David, do not mind her. She wants to tell you she is applying for jobs. Every day "applying." I think she is applying to be the Queen of

England. Anyway, let us talk about your flight in December...

Joyce stands up and walks toward the kitchen, taking the phone with her. Zara is left standing in the empty living room. The hopeful smile is gone.

SCENE 7

EXT. WUSE MARKET - DAY

Chaos. The sound of horns, shouting vendors, and loud music. JOYCE is walking fast through the narrow aisles of the market. ZARA is behind her, struggling with three heavy black nylon bags.
Joyce stops at a fish stall. A VENDOR is waving a fan over some frozen croaker.

JOYCE
How much for this one?

VENDOR
Five thousand, Mummy.

JOYCE
(Hissing)
Five thousand? For this small thing? Are you people okay?

VENDOR
Madam, the price of fuel has gone up. Everything is expensive.

JOYCE
(Turning around to look at Zara)
You see? Everything is expensive. Except my daughter. She is the only thing in this world that is free.

ZARA
Mom, please. Not here.

JOYCE
(Loud, attracting attention)
"Not here?" Then where? If you were working like your sister, would I be here counting kobo

to buy fish? Look at you. Twenty four years old, standing here like a pole. You cannot even haggle. You cannot even carry the bags properly.

A few women at the next stall turn to look. Zara’s face is a deep shade of red.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Imagine. She has a degree in Chemistry. She can tell you the name of the air, but she cannot contribute one Naira to the pot of soup.

VENDOR
Ah, Mummy. She is a fine girl. She will find work.

JOYCE
Fine girl for what? Is beauty what we will eat?

Joyce tosses a note at the vendor and grabs the fish. She thrusts the heavy, wet bag into Zara’s already full arms.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Move! Before I lose my temper. You are just a liability. Both at home and in the street.

Zara stumbles as she tries to balance the bags. She looks up, and for a split second, she locks eyes with a teenage girl nearby who is watching with wide, sad eyes. Zara looks away and follows her mother.

SCENE 8:

EXT. ESTATE LAKE - SUNSET

A stark contrast to the rest of the house. The lake is still. The orange Abuja sunset reflects off the water. ZARA is sitting on a concrete bench, a worn leather-bound diary on her lap.

She is not crying. She is writing with a focused, almost clinical intensity.

ZARA (V.O.)
My mother is an exothermic reaction. She releases heat constantly, burning everything she touches. Nneka is an inert gas. She just exists, taking up space, unreactive, safe. And me?

Zara looks at a small piece of limestone she picked up from the ground. She drops it into a tiny puddle of water at her feet. It bubbles slightly.

ZARA (V.O.)
Chemistry teaches you that if the environment is too acidic, nothing grows. You either neutralize the acid, or you dissolve in it.

Zara stands up, picks a small stone and kicks the stone into the center of the puddle. It forms a ripple until it disappears.

SCENE 9:

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

The only light comes from the small bulb inside the range hood. Zara stands over a pot of water. She drops an egg in. The sound is loud in the silence.
JOYCE appears in the doorway. She does not flip the light on. She stays in the shadows.

JOYCE
Whose stomach is crying this late?

ZARA
(Voice low)
I didn't eat, Mom.

JOYCE
Because you were too busy "thinking" at the lake? You know, Nneka worked until 9 p.m. today. She didn't even have time to feel hungry because her mind was on her goals.

Joyce walks over. She does not look at the pot. She looks at Zara’s hoodie.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
You are using the gas to cook one egg? Do you know how much a refill costs now? It is almost fifteen thousand.

ZARA
It is just an egg, Mom. I am actually shaking. I need to eat.

JOYCE
(Softly)
Then shake. Maybe if you shake hard enough, a job will fall out of your pockets.

Joyce reaches out and clicks the gas knob. The blue flame vanishes.

ZARA
(Voice cracking)
I am a human being! I am your daughter! I am not a bill! I am not a receipt!

JOYCE
(Coldly)
You are a burden, Zara. Every breath you take in this house is a debt you cannot pay. I wish I only had one daughter. At least then, my gas would last longer.

Joyce leaves. Zara reaches into the hot water with her bare hand. She winces but pulls out the half-cooked egg. She squeezes it in her fist until the shell shatters and the raw, cold yolk leaks through her fingers like liquid waste.

SCENE 10

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

The room is dark. Zara lies on her back, staring at the ceiling. Her hand is still sticky with egg yolk.
Her phone buzzes. She picks it up. The screen light is harsh, reflecting in her wide, glassy eyes.

ON SCREEN (DISCORD): *THE SAFE HOUSE — #VENT-CHANNEL*

The messages are scrolling fast.

ANNIE_99: *He called me a "waste of school fees" again just because I forgot to lock the gate. My mom just stood there. I feel like I am disappearing.*

USER_404: *I get it, Annie. They make us feel like we are the ones who asked to be born.*

K-SOUL: *Same here. If I am not bringing home an award, I am invisible. It is like they only love the version of me that makes them look good to the neighbors.*

JAM_BOX: *They always find fault in everything I do. I hate them with pure hatred* 🥵

Zara watches the text fly by. Her thumbs hover over the glass.

ZARA
(TYPING)
I hate my life.

The channel goes quiet for a split second.

8PIDER: *Why, @Zara?*

ZARA
(TYPING)
My mom is a bitch. She just turned off the gas because I wanted to boil an egg. She said I am a debt she cannot pay.

8PIDER
I am so sorry. Well, this is a safe space. Feel free to share further. We are the only family you have now.

Zara’s thumbs move faster now, the words spilling out like a broken dam.

ZARA
(TYPING)

It is not just the gas. It is everything. Since I was six, Nneka was the "miracle." I was just the "mistake." My dad is a Civil Engineer. He has been in Korea for years. He builds bridges for strangers, but he cannot even build a conversation with me. He just sends money to Mom and stays away. I have been alone in this house my whole life.

8PIDER
They have spent years making you feel small so they can feel big. You need someone who actually understands how you feel. Someone... private. Have you heard of @Anon?

A message from a user named **AKUME.PIE** suddenly interjects, cutting through 8pider's flow.

AKUME.PIE
Zara, do not listen to him. Get out while you still can. This place is a waiting room for something much darker.

[SYSTEM MESSAGE]: *User "AKUME.PIE" has been removed from The Safe House by Moderator "8PIDER".*

Zara freezes. She sits up slightly, staring at the empty space where the warning just flashed and then vanished.

ZARA
(TYPING)
Umm... What just happened?

8PIDER
Ignore. That Akume dude is a paranoid conspiracy theorist. Always trying to ruin anything good. So, are you interested in linking up with @Anon or not?

Zara pauses. Her thumb hovers.

ZARA
(TYPING)
Thanks but No

She does not send it. She stops, looking down at her palm. The dried, sticky yellow of the egg yolk is caught in the creases of her skin. She hears her mother's voice echoing in the dark: *"I wish I only had one daughter."*

The reminiscing stops. Zara's face goes cold. She hits backspace, deleting the refusal.

ZARA
(TYPING)
Thanks, I'd love that!

8PIDER
Awesome. Drop your X username here. @Anon will message you himself.

ZARA
(TYPING)
Ok.

Zara sighs and sets the phone face down on her chest. The blue light spills out from under her, pulsing against the dark sheets like a digital heartbeat.

SCENE 11

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - DAY (3 DAYS LATER)

The room is dim. Zara is sitting upright, wearing a crisp white shirt. She looks like a different person—hopeful.

ON SCREEN: A Zoom gallery. MR. JACK MILLER, a German recruiter, is speaking.

MR. MILLER
(V.O.)
...and the relocation package includes the Blue Card processing for Frankfurt. Zara, your chemical research is impressive. If we proceed, how soon can you start the visa—

The door bangs open. JOYCE marches in, dropping an empty plastic crate on the floor with a deafening *CLATTER*.

JOYCE
Zara! Get up. The water truck is at the gate. Go and buy four bags of sachet water and two packs of bottled water. Move!

ZARA
(Whispering, panic rising)
Mom, please... I am in a final interview. This is for the Germany role. I will go in ten minutes. Please.

JOYCE
Germany? Is that where they teach children to ignore their mothers? You are sitting here "travelling" in your head while I am thirsting in my own house?

ZARA
Mom, please! This is a work visa! Mr. Miller, one second—

JOYCE
Mr. Miller can wait. My throat cannot.

Joyce lunges. Her hand slams the laptop screen down. *CRACK.*

ZARA
Mom, what the fuck! This is my life! This was my way out!

Zara tries to pry the laptop open. Joyce slams her palm onto the lid, pinning it to the desk. They struggle, their breathing heavy and jagged.

JOYCE
Do not use that language with me! You think because you want to run to Europe you are now the head of this house? Go to the gate!

ZARA
(Gritting her teeth)
Get... off... it!

Zara shoves Joyce’s arm away. She grabs the laptop and bolts toward the ensuite bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Zara slams the door and locks it. She fumbles with the laptop. She lifts the lid. The screen flickers, showing the login page.

ON SCREEN: *Meeting ID: 442 091... Status: Meeting ended by host.*

ZARA
No. No, no, no... please.

She hits "Rejoin." *Connection Failed.* She refreshes her email.

ZARA
(TYPING)
Mr. Miller, I am so sorry. My connection dropped. Please, can we continue? This is my dream role.

She stares at the inbox. The silence is heavy. The rage boils over. She flings the bathroom door open and storms into the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Joyce is calmly rinsing a glass at the sink.

ZARA
Are you happy? Is this what you wanted? You just killed my visa! You just locked me in this house forever!

JOYCE
(Turning slowly)
I locked you? No, Zara. Your selfishness locked you. You wait until I am thirsty to start "travelling."

ZARA
(Screaming)
I was trying to leave! I was trying to give you the space you keep saying you want! Why do you hate me so much?

JOYCE
I am tired of you. You are a heavy stone tied to my neck. Every time I try to breathe, I remember I have a failure eating my food.

ZARA

(Sobbing heavily)
I can’t do this anymore. I am tired of this life. I feel like killing myself! I’ll just end it so you don't have to look at me anymore!

JOYCE
(Walking closer, eyes like flint)
Then kill yourself. Do it. If you are so tired of the life I am providing for you, go and meet your Maker. At least then, the world will be a better place. At least then, I can use your room for something productive.

Joyce picks up the empty crate and shoves it into Zara’s chest.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
But before you die, go and buy the water.

Zara stands frozen, the plastic crate pressed against her stomach. She lets out a jagged, silent sob.

Zara drops the crate. It clatters on the tiles, echoing through the empty kitchen.

SCENE 12

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is silent. Zara is sitting on the floor, leaning against the side of her bed. Her eyes are red and swollen. The laptop sits on the desk, closed. She picks up her phone. She opens X.

ON SCREEN: *1 New Notification.*

NOTIFICATION: *@Anon_99 followed you.*

NOTIFICATION: *@Anon_99 sent you a Direct Message.*

Zara opens the message.

ANON_99: *Hello, Zara. I am Anon. Spider mentioned you were looking for a safe space to talk. I work as a therapist, though this is strictly*

informal. My only goal is to listen.

ANON_99
You don’t have to tell me anything you aren’t comfortable with. If at any point you feel uneasy, you can block me. No hard feelings.

Zara stares at the screen. The professional tone is a sharp contrast to the chaos of the kitchen. She begins to type, her thumbs shaking.

ZARA
(TYPING)
I just lost everything. My mom... she just killed my chance at a work visa for Germany. She closed my laptop in the middle of the final interview because she wanted me to go and buy water.

ANON_99
That sounds incredibly heavy, Zara. A relocation opportunity like that is a massive deal. Are you sure you have lost it?

ZARA
(TYPING)
Obviously. It was a German firm. They don't do "second chances" for people who vanish mid-sentence. I emailed them, but there is no reply. I am trapped here.

ANON_99
I am so sorry. Nobody should have their future handled that way, especially by someone who is supposed to support them.

ANON_99
Sometimes text doesn't capture the full weight of these things. When are you free for a call?

ZARA
(TYPING)
I don't do calls.

ANON_99

No problem at all. I understand. Take care of yourself, Zara.

Zara watches the message icon appear. She looks at her bedroom door. The silence of the house feels like it’s suffocating her.

ZARA (TYPING)
Wait.

ANON_99
??

ZARA (TYPING)
11 p.m. When my mom goes to bed.

ANON_99
Great. I will call you then.

Zara sets the phone down. She pulls her knees to her chest and rests her chin on them.
22:14. The numbers glow in the dark like a countdown.

SCENE 13

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (11:00 PM)

The room is pitch black, save for the single white dot of the standby light on the television. **ZARA** is huddled under her duvet, her face illuminated by the cold glow of her phone screen.
23:00. The phone vibrates. An incoming X Audio Call: **@Anon_99**.

Zara slides the green icon and presses the phone to her ear. She is breathing fast, eyes fixed on the door as if expecting it to burst open.

ZARA
(A terrified whisper)
Hello?

ANON (V.O.)
(Voice is unnaturally deep, vibrating with a mechanical, bassy texture)
Hello, Zara. I am glad you stayed up.

Zara pulls the phone away for a second, frowning at the strange, distorted depth of the voice.

ZARA
Your voice... it sounds like a machine. Why does it sound like that?

ANON (V.O.)
It is a pitch shifter, Zara. In my line of work, anonymity is a requirement for safety. If we are going to speak about things that matter, we both need to feel secure. My identity does not change the truth of what I say. Does it bother you?

ZARA
No. It is just different.

ANON (V.O.)
I understand. I am sorry you have to be so careful in your own home. You have spent a long time being ignored, and I want you to know that I am listening.

ZARA
(Voice cracking)
I am not used to people listening.

ANON (V.O.)
Your mother. Tell me about her. Tell me when things first started to feel difficult.

ZARA
(Sighs, leaning back against the headboard)

It wasn't always like this. Or maybe it was, and I was just too small to notice. My dad is a Civil Engineer. He used to be home more when I was little. I remember him taking me to the park... but then Nneka happened.

ANON (V.O.)
Your sister.

ZARA
Yeah. She was born three weeks early, tiny and perfect. From the moment she could crawl, she was fast. Smart. My mom saw herself in her. But me? I was the one who cried too much, who broke things, who didn't fit the perfect Abuja image my mom wanted.

ANON (V.O.)
And your interest in chemistry? Why that?

ZARA
Because chemicals follow rules. If you mix two things, you get a predictable result. Every single time. It was the only thing in my life that made sense. I thought if I got the degree, if I became a scientist, they would finally see my value. But then Nneka graduated in Software Engineering. She started making four thousand dollars a month from her bedroom.

ANON (V.O.)
And suddenly, your hard work was compared to a paycheck.

ZARA
Exactly. My mom treats Nneka like a success. Today... that interview... it was my only way out. Frankfurt. A lab lead role. I was going to leave a note and just disappear.

ANON (V.O.)
(Calm, supportive)
And she took that choice away from you. She did not just stop a meeting, Zara. She interrupted your path to a better life. She saw you trying to grow, and she made sure you stayed right where she could see you.

ZARA
(Sobbing silently)

She told me to kill myself. She said the world would be better without me. My own mother. How does a person say that to their child?

ANON (V.O.)
She says it because she does not understand your worth, Zara. You are a person of value, regardless of what she says in her anger. You are carrying a heavy burden, and it is okay to feel hurt by that.

ZARA
I feel so alone in this house.

ANON (V.O.)
You aren't alone anymore, Zara. I see the person you are trying to be. I see the scientist, the dreamer, and the daughter who deserves respect. We are going to help you find your voice again.

ZARA
(Teary, emotional)
Thank you.

ANON (V.O.)
Don't mention it. Now get some sleep. Bye.

ZARA
(Teary)
Bye.

The call ends with a sharp, digital beep. Zara sits in the silence. For the first time in years, her expression is calm yet teary. She can't believe someone finally cares.

SCENE 14

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - DAY

ZARA is sitting at her small vanity. She is holding a glass conical flask with a faded gold sticker on the base that reads: 1st Place (Inter School Science Fair (SS1)).

It is crystal clear, polished to a shine. She holds it up to the light, looking at the measurements on the side as if they are a map to a better

time.

The door swings open without a knock. JOYCE enters, carrying a stack of Nneka’s freshly laundered clothes.

JOYCE
Why is this room so dusty? Are you breeding bacteria in here for fun?

ZARA
(Voice steady)
I am cleaning, Mom.

JOYCE
(Setting the clothes on Zara’s bed)
You are cleaning a piece of old glass. Nneka needs her room reorganized because she is getting a second monitor for her work. Since you are not busy, go and help her move the filing cabinet.

ZARA
I am right in the middle of something. I will do it in twenty minutes.

Joyce stops. She turns slowly, her eyes landing on the conical flask in Zara's hand.

JOYCE
Busy. You use that word like it has value. This... this is what makes you busy? Holding onto a trophy from years ago?

ZARA
(Clutching the flask tighter)
I won this in SS1, Mom. I want to keep it. I want to show it to my kids one day so they know their mother was good at something.

JOYCE
It is a waste of space. Just like the person holding it. Your kids will need food, Zara, not a dusty bottle from a high school fair.

Joyce walks over and reaches out. She does not grab it. She just taps the base of the flask with one finger, tipping the balance. Zara’s hands are shaky. The glass slips.

The flask hits the hard floor tiles and explodes into a thousand jagged diamonds.

ZARA
(A strangled cry)
Mom! That was the only thing I had left from school!

JOYCE
(Coldplay)
You had a brain from school, but you chose not to use it. If you want to keep treasures, buy them with your own money. Now, go to Nneka’s room. If I come back and see you still sitting here over this rubbish, I will throw the whole desk outside.

Joyce walks out, stepping over the glass shards without a glance.

ZARA collapses to her knees. She reaches out to touch a piece of the broken glass, but stops. She is shaking, but she is not crying. She reaches for her phone.

ON SCREEN (X Direct Message):

ZARA: My mom, she just destroyed a conical flask I treasured. A gift from High school. I wanted to show it to my future kids. She did it on purpose.

ANON_99: I am so incredibly sorry, Zara. That was a symbol of your brilliance. You deserve to have things that celebrate you. It is hard when people do not respect your history. You are more than the things she breaks. Please, take a deep breath. I am here.

ZARA: I am so tired of being the one who gets hurt.

ANON_99: I know you are. You have a lot of strength to endure this. Just take things one step at a time today. Focus.

Zara stares at the largest shard of the flask. Her reflection is split into pieces. She stands up, wipes her face, and walks out toward Nneka's room.

SCENE 15

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The living room is staged like a magazine shoot. A professional PHOTOGRAPHER is adjusting a softbox light. JOYCE is wearing a stunning lace iro and buba. NNEKA is in a sharp corporate power suit. ZARA stands in the hallway, wearing her usual faded hoodie, watching them.

JOYCE
(To the Photographer)
Please, make sure the light catches the embroidery on my shoulder. This photo is for the Estate Magazine’s "Families of Excellence" feature.

PHOTOGRAPHER
No problem, Madam. Okay, let’s have the daughters now.

Zara takes a hesitant step into the room. She smooths her hair down, trying to look presentable.

JOYCE
(Waving a hand dismissively)
Oh, no. Just Nneka.

ZARA
(Stunned)
Mom? The man said "daughters." Plural.

JOYCE
(Not looking at her)
Zara, look at you. You look like a tenant, not a daughter. This feature is about achievement. It is about the future of this estate. Nneka is a Senior Developer. She represents what this family has built.

ZARA
I am a Chemist, Mom. I have a degree too. I can just go change into my gown. It will take two minutes.

JOYCE
(To the Photographer, ignoring Zara)
Nneka, stand slightly behind me. Put your hand on my chair. Yes. Success looks so good on you, my dear.

NNEKA
(Checking her watch)
Mom, let’s hurry. I have a stand up meeting with the San Francisco team in ten minutes.

ZARA
(Voice trembling)
I’m standing right here. You are taking a "Family" portrait and I’m standing right here!

JOYCE
(Turning, cold)
A family is a brand, Zara. Right now, you are a product recall. Go to the kitchen and make sure the caterers do not burn the snacks for the Photographer. Do not ruin this for your sister.

The camera flashes. Bright white. Zara is caught in the edge of the light, but she is not in the frame. She turns and walks away as the Photographer says, "Beautiful! Perfect family!".

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

The bathroom is cold, white marble. ZARA is sitting on the floor, back pressed against the bathtub. Outside, the muffled sounds of Joyce and Nneka laughing over wine can be heard. Zara’s thumb trembles as she types.

ON SCREEN (X DIRECT MESSAGE):

ZARA: They took a family portrait today. My mom told the photographer to only shoot her and Nneka. She said I look like a tenant. I was right in front of them. I feel like a ghost.

ANON_99: That is heartbreaking, Zara. To be made invisible in your own home is a special kind of pain. They are trying to erase you because they can not control your light. They only want the version of the "family" that looks good in a magazine.

ANON_99: You exist to me. You are the most real person in that house because you are not wearing a mask.

ZARA: Then why does it hurt so much to be alive? I just want to be seen.

ANON_99: Because you are seeking water from a dry well, Zara. You have to stop looking for your reflection in their eyes. I see you. Stay with me.

Zara pulls her knees to her chest. A sob breaks out (small at first, then deep and jagged). She bites her hand to keep the sound from reaching the hallway. The screen goes black.

SCENE 16

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

ZARA is sitting on the sofa next to VICTOR (26). He is holding a small bouquet of supermarket flowers. They are talking in low, intimate whispers.

VICTOR
I am so sorry about the visa, Zara. I have been looking at some local lab openings. It is not Frankfurt, but it is a start.

ZARA
(Small smile)
Thank you, Victor. Just having you here helps.

The sound of sharp heels clicking on the marble floor cuts through the moment. JOYCE enters and stands over them.

JOYCE
Oh, Victor. Still driving that noisy silver car? I heard it struggling at the gate. I thought it was the trash truck.

VICTOR
(Standing up)
Good afternoon, Mummy. It is just a minor engine issue.

JOYCE
Zara, why is he here? Nneka’s boyfriend just sent her a diamond watch from London. What is your vision, Victor? Aside from eating roadside roasted corn?

ZARA
Mom, please! We are just talking.

JOYCE
(To Victor)
If you loved her, you would stay away until you were a man of substance. You want her to stay down here with you in the dirt.

VICTOR
(To Zara, pained)
Zara... I think I should go. I can not do this.

Victor looks at Zara, shakes his head, and walks out. Zara tries to follow, but Joyce grips her arm, pulling her back.

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Zara stares at a text from Victor: *I love you, but I can not come back to that house. It is too much. I am sorry.*

Her thumbs tremble as she types back: *I am sorry.*

She hits send.

A red exclamation mark appears. **"Message Not Delivered."** She tries again. The result is the same.

ZARA
(A hollow whisper)
He blocked me?

She taps the call icon. It rings once, then cuts straight to a digital **"User Unavailable"** tone. She pulls the phone away, staring at the screen

as the realization sinks in. She switches apps and begins typing into her DMs.

ON SCREEN (X Direct Message):

ZARA: She did it. She humiliated my boyfriend today... He blocked me. I have nobody now. I am completely alone.

ANON_99 (REPLYING IMMEDIATELY): I am so sorry, Zara. But remember, he chose to leave. He was not strong enough for you. You do not need someone who runs away when things get difficult.

ANON_99: It is time to stop being the one who cries. Go to Nneka's room. That two hundred thousand naira silk dress she bought for her party? It would be a shame if it was ruined. Do it. Let them see what happens when they push you too far.

ZARA: What? No. I can not do that. That is my sister's dress. I am not a criminal, Anon. No. This is wrong. Do not message me again. Goodnight.

Zara flings the phone onto her bed. She is breathing hard, her chest heaving with a sudden anger toward the only person she thought was on her side.

SCENE 17

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

NNEKA is sitting on a stone bench, looking relaxed. She takes a long drag of a cigarette and exhales. Zara walks out and stops abruptly.

ZARA
Nneka? Since when do you smoke?

NNEKA
(Not looking at her)
Since I started paying for the air conditioning you enjoy, Zara.

Zara snatches the cigarette from Nneka’s fingers and grinds it into the dirt. Nneka bolts upright.

NNEKA

What is wrong with you? Are you crazy?

ZARA
Does Mom know you do this? The "Perfect Daughter" is a smoker?

The sliding glass door creaks open. **JOYCE** steps out.

ZARA (CONT'D)
Mom! Look at this. Your favorite daughter is out here smoking. I just caught her.

Joyce looks at the crushed cigarette, then at Zara. She sighs.

JOYCE
Zara, stop being a local informant. Nneka is under a lot of pressure. If she needs a moment to clear her head, that is her business.

ZARA
(Stunned)
Wait. You are defending her? If you caught me with a cigarette, you would throw me out!

JOYCE
Because you have nothing to be stressed about. You do not bring anything to this house. Nneka earns the right to her vices. You just bring complaints.

NNEKA
(Smirking)
Thanks for being supportive, Mom. Unlike this big loser here who just wants to see everyone fail with her.

ZARA
(Voice rising)
Who are you calling a loser? I have a degree in Chemistry! I am a scientist!

NNEKA
(Hisses)
You are a waitress without a restaurant.

Nneka turns to walk back inside. Zara reaches out and grabs Nneka’s arm, spinning her around.

ZARA
Don't you dare walk away from me!

Nneka strikes Zara across the face. The impact is sharp. Zara lunges forward to retaliate, but Joyce intercepts, pinning Zara's wrists with a bruising grip.

JOYCE
How dare you! How dare you raise your hand against the sister who feeds you!

Joyce delivers a heavy handed blow that snaps Zara’s head to the side. Nneka joins in, shoving Zara hard to the grass. They do not stop (a flurry of shoves and strikes as Zara cowers).

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Stay out there. Do not bring your bad energy into my living room.

Joyce and Nneka walk inside. The sliding door clicks shut. The lock turns. Zara lies in the dirt, clutching her stomach, sobbing silently.

SCENE 18

EXT. ESTATE LAKE - SUNSET

The sky is a violent shade of bruised orange. **ZARA** sits on her usual bench. One side of her face is swollen; her lip is cut.

She is writing in her diary, her pen moving so fast it tears the paper. She slams the book shut and opens the chat with **ANON_99**.

ZARA (TYPING)
I am in.

ANON_99 (REPLY)
😈

Zara puts the phone into her pocket. She stands at the edge of the water, staring into the setting sun. Her eyes are cold. Empty.

She draws a deep breath and lets out a guttural roar that rips through the evening air. The wind picks up, feeling suddenly ice cold. Zara stands tall, her shadow stretching long and sharp across the grass like a blade.

FADE OUT.

SCENE 19

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT (2:00 AM)

The house is deathly silent. The only sound is the low hum of the massive double-door refrigerator. **ZARA** moves with lethal silence. Her face is still swollen, a dark bruise blooming along her jawline. She isn't crying anymore. Her movements are precise and clinical.

She opens the cupboard under the sink and pulls out a bottle of heavy-duty drain cleaner and industrial bleach. She sets them on the counter next to a small glass jar.

ZARA (V.O.)
In Chemistry, a solvent doesn't just clean; it reorganizes. It finds the strongest bonds, the ones that carry the illusion of being unbreakable, and it simply proves to them that they are made of nothing but fragile links.

ZARA
(A cold, detached whisper)
Sodium hydroxide... meet sodium hypochlorite.

She mixes a small, concentrated solution in the glass jar. She knows the science: the high pH will attack the peptide bonds in the silk. It won't just stain; it will turn the fabric into a structural ghost.

INT. NNEKA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

ZARA pushes the door open. The air smells like expensive lavender candles. **NNEKA** is fast asleep, tucked under a weighted blanket. In the corner, hanging on a custom mahogany stand, is the emerald green silk dress.

ZARA (V.O.)
My mother says I am lead while Nneka is gold. But every metal has a point where it begins to

pit. Where it begins to flake away into the air until there is nothing left to hold.

ZARA dips a cotton swab into the solution. She applies the chemical in thin, invisible lines along the shoulder straps and the main seams of the bodice. To the naked eye, it looks perfect. But on a molecular level, the fibers are snapping.

ZARA
(Whispering to the dress)
You look so beautiful, Nneka. Everyone is going to be looking at you.

INT. ZARA'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

ZARA sits on her bed. She is shaking, but her eyes are bright with a terrifying adrenaline.

ON SCREEN (X DIRECT MESSAGE):

ZARA (TYPING)
It’s done. The seams are compromised. She’s going to wear it to the party tomorrow.

ANON_99
(REPLYING)
Brilliant. You aren’t a victim, Zara. You are a catalyst. You change the environment around you. How does it feel to finally have the power?

ZARA
(TYPING)
It feels... quiet. For the first time, quiet.

ANON_99
That is the feeling of control. Get some rest.

ZARA SETS HER PHONE FACE DOWN. SHE LIES BACK AND CLOSES HER EYES, HER BREATHING RHYTHMIC AND CALM FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS.

SCENE 20

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is transformed with gold and silver balloons. A "HAPPY BIRTHDAY NNEKA" banner hangs crookedly. About fifteen people, Nneka's tech friends, are laughing over loud Afrobeats music. JOYCE moves through the crowd, glowing.

JOYCE
(To a guest)
Yes, she's so hardworking! She even bought this dress herself. Pure silk. Only the best for my Nneka.

ZARA is in the kitchen doorway, partially hidden by the corner of the wall. She is holding a plate of small chops she was forced to prep. Her eyes are fixed on the hallway.

NNEKA (O.S.)
Mom! I'm coming out!

JOYCE
Come out, birthday girl!

NNEKA steps into the room. She looks radiant in the emerald silk. It shimmers under the harsh lights.

ZARA (V.O.)
Surface tension is a beautiful lie. It makes you believe the liquid is solid. It makes you believe the container will hold.

NNEKA
(To the room)
Thanks, guys! You like it?

ZARA
(Voice low)
It suits you perfectly, Nneka.

NNEKA walks toward the center of the room. As she reaches for a bottle of champagne, the tension in the fabric hits its limit. A sharp, SNAPPING sound cuts through the music.

The left shoulder strap dissolves into dust. The bodice begins to unzip itself from the top down.

NNEKA
(Gasping)
What... what is happening?

She reaches up, but as her hand touches the fabric, the silk tears like wet paper. A huge, jagged rent opens across her chest.

GUEST 1
Oh my god! Nneka!

NNEKA panics, pulling at the fabric, but everywhere she touches, the skeleton of the dress collapses. The expensive silk hangs off her in oily, stained rags. She is standing in her underwear in front of her peers.

NNEKA
(Screaming)
Mom! Help me! It’s melting!

JOYCE
(Rushing over)
What is this? Nneka, go to the room!

The guests are recording on their phones. The "Perfect Daughter" is a mess of shredded fabric. Nneka looks up, her eyes scanning the room until they land on ZARA.

NNEKA
(Pointing)
You. You did this!

ZARA
(Calmly)
I didn't touch your dress, Nneka. Maybe it just couldn't handle the pressure. Just like you.

JOYCE
(Roaring)
ZARA! GET OUT!

Zara Leaves.

SCENE 21

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

The house is unnaturally quiet. **JOYCE** is standing outside Nneka's door like a palace guard. She is holding a finger to her lips as **ZARA** walks past with a laundry basket.

JOYCE
(A harsh whisper)
Stay away from here. Nneka is having her Global Town Hall with the Americans. If I hear one sound from you, you will sleep outside tonight.

ZARA
(Nods slowly)
I'm just going to the store room, Mom.

INT. NNEKA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

NNEKA is sitting at her desk, framed by the light of a high-end desktop computer. She is wearing her noise-canceling headphones. On the large monitor screen, a gallery of thirty faces looks back at her.

NNEKA
(Into her mic, sounding polished)
Thank you, everyone. I'm pulling up the backend architecture for the new payment gateway now. It's been a long night here in Abuja, but we're excited to show you the progress.

INT. STORE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The store room is cramped and smells of dust. In the corner, the large inverter system hums. This is the heart of the house. **ZARA** stands before the battery rack. She has a small spray bottle filled with a high concentration salt solution.

ZARA (V.O.)

In Chemistry, a conductor allows the flow of energy. An insulator stops it. But if you introduce the right impurity, you don't just stop the flow. You create a short. You create a mess.

ZARA sprays the solution directly onto the battery terminals. She isn't smashing things. She is just facilitating a reaction.

INT. NNEKA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

NNEKA
(Smiling at the screen)
As you can see on the shared screen, the latency has been reduced by forty percent. This ensures that the dollars processed through the system...

A small spark flies from the corner of the room. The lights flicker and die. The hum of the air conditioner cuts out.

NNEKA
(Panic in her voice)
Wait. Hello? Can you guys hear me?

The desktop monitor screen goes black. The Wi-Fi router on the desk loses its glowing green light. **NNEKA** pulls off her headphones, staring into the sudden darkness.

NNEKA
Mummy! The inverter! Mummy, my meeting!

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

JOYCE is frantically hitting the light switch. Nothing happens.

JOYCE
Nneka! What happened? Zara! Come!

ZARA walks out of the store room, calmly wiping her hands on a rag. She looks at her mother with a blank face.

ZARA
Is something wrong, Mom? I thought Nneka paid for the best maintenance.

NNEKA
(Running out of her rooms, hysteriCAL)
I was in the middle of a presentation! My CEO was on the call! My whole career is on that line!

ZARA
(Softly)
That sounds stressful. Maybe you're just under too much pressure.

JOYCE
(Grabbing Zara's shoulder)
Go and check it! Now! If that system is burnt, you will pay for it with your life!

ZARA
I'm a Chemist, Mom. I don't know anything about electronics.

ZARA TURNS AND WALKS TOWARD HER BEDROOM. SHE CLOSES THE DOOR AND LEANS AGAINST IT. HER PHONE VIBRATES.

ON SCREEN (X DIRECT MESSAGE):

ZARA (TYPING)
The blackout was a success. She's losing it.

ANON_99
I felt the silence from here. You are becoming a master of the craft, Zara. But the small experiments are over. Now, we prep.

ZARA (TYPING)
Tell me what to do.

SCENE 22

INT. PASTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

The office is plush and quiet. **PASTOR CHIMA** (40s, expensive suit) sits behind a massive oak desk. **JOYCE** is sitting across from him, her hands trembling. On the desk sits the small, ornate glass bottle of anointing oil.

ZARA (V.O.)
My mother believes that oil can wash away a curse. She believes that if she prays loud enough, the universe will ignore the way she treats her own blood. But oil is just a long sequence of hydrocarbons. And hydrocarbons are very sensitive to a change in composition.

PASTOR CHIMA
Sister Joyce, I can see the heavy spirit upon you. Your household is under attack. We must seal your gates with the oil of favor.

JOYCE
(Nodding fervently)
Yes, Pastor. Everything is falling apart. My daughter's dress, the electricity... it is the enemy, Pastor.

PASTOR CHIMA
(Unscrewing the bottle)
Then let us apply the fire of the spirit.

He pours a generous amount into his palm. He leans forward and rubs it vigorously across **JOYCE'S** forehead.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

ZARA is sitting on the sofa at home, staring at the clock on the wall.

ZARA (V.O.)

At first, it feels like a cooling sensation. Then, the molecules begin to bind with the moisture in the pores. The reaction is exothermic. It creates heat.

INT. PASTOR'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

JOYCE'S eyes snap open. She touches her forehead. It's turning a bright, angry red.

PASTOR CHIMA
Receive the touch of...

JOYCE lets out a sharp, strangled cry. She jumps out of the chair, clawing at her face. It feels like someone has pressed a hot iron against her forehead.

JOYCE
(Gasping)
Pastor! My face! It's burning! It's actually burning!

PASTOR CHIMA
(Startled, looking at his own hands)
Sister Joyce? What is happening?

JOYCE isn't listening. She runs to the small bathroom in the corner of the office, sobbing. The skin is already blistering in small, white patches. She splashes water on her face, but the chemical has already done its work.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

The front door bursts open. JOYCE stumbles in, her face a mask of red, peeling skin. She is hyperventilating.

JOYCE
Zara! Nneka! Get me cold water! The oil turned into fire!

NNEKA runs out of her room, frantic at the sight of her mother. ZARA follows slowly, standing a few feet back. She watches JOYCE'S ruined face with a terrifying lack of empathy.

ZARA
Maybe the oil was trying to tell you something, Mom.

JOYCE
(Wailing)
It was a spiritual attack! The Pastor saw it! Someone has brought a curse into this house!

ZARA
(Softly)
Or maybe you just have a very bad reaction to things that are supposed to be holy.

ZARA turns and walks back to the kitchen. Her phone pings.

ON SCREEN (X DIRECT MESSAGE):

ZARA (TYPING)
It's done. My mother is back. She's terrified. She holds the conviction that the devil is in the house.

ANON_99
She isn't entirely wrong. You've stripped away their comfort. Now, we prep.

ZARA (TYPING)
Tell me what to do.

ZARA POURS A GLASS OF ICE-COLD WATER. SHE DOESN'T TAKE IT TO HER MOTHER. SHE DRINKS IT SLOWLY, WATCHING THE CHAOS IN THE LIVING ROOM.

SCENE 23

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

A week has passed. The afternoon sun filters through the expensive lace curtains, casting patterned shadows on the marble floor. **JOYCE** sits on the sofa, her face mostly healed, though she periodically dabs a moist handkerchief on the shiny, pink patches near her hairline. **AUNTY BOLA** sits opposite her, fanning herself with a church bulletin.

ZARA (V.O.)
In a lab, you wait for the solution to stabilize before you add the next reagent.

JOYCE
...I'm telling you, Bola, I felt the heat before the oil even touched my skin. The Pastor was shocked. He said he had never seen an attack so brazen.

AUNTY BOLA
It's the times we live in, Joyce. People see your house, they see Nneka's success, and they start cooking things in the dark. You are lucky you have a strong prayer life. If it were a nominal Christian, that oil would have peeled your whole face.

JOYCE
(Nodding)
Exactly. But God is in control. Anyway, let's not let the devil ruin our mood. I felt so bad about missing your birthday yesterday. My head has been so full of these trials.

Joyce looks toward the kitchen hallway and her voice sharpens.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Zara! Zara, come here!

ZARA walks in, holding a wrapped shoe box. She moves slowly, eyes downcast.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Look at her. Even to walk and bring a gift for her Auntie is a struggle. Greet your Auntie Bola properly.

ZARA

(Voice low)
Good afternoon, Auntie. Happy birthday.

AUNTY BOLA
(Kindly)
Thank you, my dear. How are the applications? You should be like Nneka, always busy.

JOYCE
(Scoffing)
Busy with what? Busy eating my food. Zara, give her the gift and go and check the stew. Don't let it burn like you usually do.

Zara hands the box to Bola. Her fingers linger on the cardboard for a second before she pulls away. She turns and walks toward the hallway, but instead of going to the kitchen, she slips behind the heavy dining room curtain, leaving just a sliver of space to watch.

AUNTY BOLA
(Excitedly)
Oh, Joyce! You shouldn't have! Is it the silver heels from that boutique?

JOYCE
(Smiling for the first time)
Open it. You know I have taste.

Bola pulls the ribbon. She lifts the lid.
The silence that follows is thick. Bola’s smile doesn't just fade; it curdles. Inside the box, coiled tightly on a bed of tissue paper, is a **DEAD BLACK SNAKE**. Its scales are dull, its jaw frozen open in a final, stiff agony.

AUNTY BOLA
(A strangled, guttural scream)
CHINEKE!

She hurls the box. It hits the coffee table, and the snake slides out, landing with a soft *thud* on the rug.

JOYCE

(Screaming, jumping onto the sofa)
Snake! Snake! Zara!

They both scream. Then notice it's dead.

AUNTY BOLA
(Backing away, chest heaving)
Joyce? Is this your idea of a joke? You invited me here to give me a serpent?

JOYCE
(Hysterical)
No! Bola, I bought shoes! I swear to you on the altar, I put shoes in that box!

AUNTY BOLA
(Pointing a trembling finger at the snake)
Shoes don't turn into cobras, Joyce! This is witchcraft! I told you this house felt heavy. The things you have been doing... the "attacks" you talk about... they are coming from inside!

JOYCE
Bola, please! It’s the enemy!

AUNTY BOLA
(Grabbing her bag)
I am the enemy? Me? For coming to visit you? Keep your gift, Joyce. Keep your house. I am going to my house!

Bola bolts for the door. The heavy mahogany door slams shut, the sound echoing through the house. Joyce collapses onto the sofa, staring at the dead reptile on her floor.
Behind the curtain, **ZARA** watches her mother’s breakdown. A small, jagged smile touches her lips.

SCENE 24

EXT. FRONT PORCH - THREE DAYS LATER

The morning heat is already heavy. **JOYCE** is sitting in a garden chair, a devotional book open on her lap, but she isn't reading. She looks tired. **ZARA** walks out from the house, carrying a glass of orange juice.

ZARA
Your juice, Mom.

Joyce takes the glass, takes a long sip, and immediately grimaces.

JOYCE
(Slamming the glass onto the side table)
What is wrong with you? Is the fridge broken?

ZARA
No. Why?

JOYCE
This juice is warm! It’s like you left it on the counter for an hour. Can’t you do anything right? I asked for cold juice. It’s a simple request, Zara. Even a child can follow it. You are just incompetent. Totally useless. Go back and put ice.

ZARA
(Calmly)
Okay.

Zara picks up the glass and heads inside. Joyce rubs her temples, muttering to herself about "ungrateful children." Her phone rings. She looks at the screen — it’s **MR. JEFFREY**, the neighbor from two houses down.

JOYCE
(Answering)
Hello, Mr. Jeffrey? Good morning.

INTERCUT - MR. JEFFREY (NEIGHBOR)

MR. JEFFREY

Mrs. Joyce, good morning. I've been trying to tag you on the Estate WhatsApp group. Are you seeing the messages?

JOYCE
I've been off the phone this morning, trying to have some quiet time. Why? Is there a security meeting?

MR. JEFFREY
(Awkwardly)
Not exactly. Madam, please... just go outside your gate. Right now. I think you need to see what's going on before more people drive past.

Joyce's heart sinks. She puts her phone aside. She stands up, her knees slightly shaky, and walks down the long driveway. She unlocks the pedestrian gate and steps onto the street.

EXT. ESTATE STREET - CONTINUOUS

On the pristine, white-painted exterior wall of the compound, written in massive, jagged, dripping black letters: **MRS. JOYCE IS A PROSTITUTE.** The ink looks like it has bled into the very pores of the stone.

Joyce stops dead. She feels the blood drain from her face. Across the street, a **YOUNG MAN** in a football jersey is leaning against a car, holding his phone up, filming. Two other women from the estate are standing further down, whispering and pointing.

JOYCE
(A shrill, broken cry)
Hey! You! Delete that! What are you doing?

The Young Man doesn't stop. He laughs, looking at his friends.

YOUNG MAN
(In Pidgin)
Mummy, why you dey shout? We just dey look the "special offer." Mrs. Joyce, how much for one night? You get neighbor discount or na only for "high-class" people?

JOYCE

(Screaming)
I will call the police for you! You bastard!

She frantically looks around, grabs her shoe, and hurls it at him. He ducks, the shoe bouncing off the asphalt. He and his friends howl with laughter.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
Zara! Zara, come out here! Bring water! Bring the sponge! Now!

Zara runs out, her eyes wide with "shock."

ZARA
Mom! Oh my God, look!

JOYCE
Don't look at it, wash it! Get the detergent! Scrub it off!

Zara brings a bucket of soapy water and a heavy-duty sponge. She starts scrubbing at the "P" in "Prostitute." The ink doesn't move. It doesn't even smudge. It stays perfectly, aggressively dark.

ZARA
Mom... it’s not coming off. It’s like... it’s burnt into the wall.

JOYCE
(Pushing her aside)
Get out of the way! You are too weak for anything!

Joyce drops to her knees in her expensive housecoat. SHE scrubs with both hands, her face turning red with the effort. But the words remain—a permanent, public brand. A car slows down as it passes, the driver lowering his window to get a better look at the "virtuous" Mrs. Joyce kneeling in the dirt, scrubbing an insult.

SCENE 25

INT. PASTOR’S OFFICE - DAY

The office is quiet, smelling of expensive cologne and old paper. **PASTOR CHIMA** sits behind his desk, his hands folded. **JOYCE** is slumped in the chair, her eyes red-rimmed.

PASTOR CHIMA
It is a heavy cross, Sister Joyce. The snake... the wall... the enemy is trying to destroy your reputation. He knows you are a pillar in this church.

JOYCE
(Voice trembling)
Pastor, I can’t even go to the market. People are looking at me and laughing. My own neighbors...

PASTOR CHIMA
This is why we must fight back with the spirit.

He opens his desk drawer and pulls out a small, clear bottle of oil.

PASTOR CHIMA (CONT'D)
I have this. It was brought back from a prayer mountain. It is for total deliverance. Come, let me seal your forehead.

Joyce looks at the bottle. Her eyes widen. She flinches back so hard the chair legs screech against the floor.

JOYCE
No. No oil, Pastor. Please.

PASTOR CHIMA
(Confused)
Sis? This isn't the one you brought. This is mine. It is tested and holy.

JOYCE

(Shaking her head, her voice rising)
I know, Pastor. I know. But... the last time... the oil turned into fire. Please. Just pray. Use your hand. Use a Bible. Use water! But don't touch me with oil. I’m not... I’m not ready for that.

She stands up, clutching her bag to her chest like a shield.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
I’ll just... I’ll go home and use water to anoint myself. Something safe. Thank you, Pastor.

She exits the office almost at a run, leaving the Pastor staring at his bottle of oil in silence.

SCENE 26

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The air conditioner hums, maintaining a sharp, professional chill. **JOYCE** and **NNEKA** are seated on the velvet sofa, looking like a portrait of high-society grace. Nneka is flipping through her printed proposal one last time.
DING-DONG.

The doorbell echoes through the high-ceilinged room. Joyce’s back straightens instantly.

JOYCE
(Whispering)
He’s here. Nneka, check your hair.

Nneka pats her bun as Joyce stands and glides to the door. She opens it to reveal **MR. OKORO**. He stands there with a leather briefcase, looking every bit the gatekeeper of her daughter's future.

JOYCE
Mr. Okoro! A very warm welcome to you. Please, come in.

MR. OKORO
(Stepping inside)
Thank you, Mrs. Joyce. You have a lovely home. It’s very... serene.

JOYCE
(Beaming)
We try, sir. Peace and order are everything to us. Please, sit. This is my daughter, Nneka.

NNEKA
(Standing with a polished smile)
It is an honor, sir. I’ve been looking forward to this conversation all week.

MR. OKORO
(Shaking her hand, impressed)
The honor is mine. We don’t often see candidates with such a stellar academic record coupled with this level of poise.

They all sit. The atmosphere is thick with mutual admiration.

JOYCE
(Calling out)
Zara! Zara, please bring the wine!

ZARA (V.O.)
Poise. Decorum. Excellence. These are just words people use to describe a cage that looks nice from the outside. But cages are meant to be broken. And chemistry is the perfect hammer.

ZARA enters from the kitchen hallway. She moves quietly, almost like a ghost in her own home. She carries a tray with three crystal glasses of red wine. She serves Mr. Okoro first with a steady hand, then her mother. When she reaches Nneka, she pauses, her thumb brushing the rim of the glass for a split second.

ZARA

(In a low, steady voice)
Nneka. You've earned it.

NNEKA
(Dismissively)
Thank you. That will be all.

Zara exits, but she doesn't go far. She lingers just behind the heavy dining room curtain, leaning against the wall. She checks her watch.

MR. OKORO
(Taking a sip)
Excellent wine. Now, Miss Nneka, let's talk about your research. We are looking for ambassadors who can maintain their composure in high-pressure diplomatic environments.

NNEKA
I completely agree, sir. I believe that true leadership is about maintaining one's center, regardless of the—

GURGLE.
A strange, liquid sound ripples from Nneka's midsection. It's audible enough to make Mr. Okoro pause his glass halfway to his mouth.

JOYCE
(Quickly)
The estate is doing some maintenance on the water pipes. They've been making the most peculiar noises all morning.

MR. OKORO
(Nodding slowly)
I see. Well—

PRRRRRRT.
A short, sharp, brassy sound breaks.
Nneka's face goes from bronze to a sickly, pale grey. She squeezes her eyes shut for a second, her posture becoming incredibly rigid.

MR. OKORO
(Adjusting his glasses)
Is there... a draft in here?

NNEKA
(Voice strained)
No. Not at all. As I was saying... the... the reputation of the institution is—

BRRRRRRR-UP.
A longer, deeper, vibrating sound follows. It is followed by a faint, heavy, sulfurous smell that begins to cloud the expensive air of the lounge. Mr. Okoro's nose twitches. He looks at Nneka, then at the sofa, then back at Nneka.

JOYCE
(Looking panicked)
Nneka? Are you alright?

NNEKA
(Beads of sweat forming on her forehead)
I'm fine, Mom. It's just... the... I—

PRRRRRRR-ACK.
It's an uncontrollable eruption. Nneka grips the armrests so hard her knuckles turn white. She is physically vibrating in her seat. The smell is now thick and unmistakable.

MR. OKORO
(Setting his glass down)
Miss Nneka, perhaps you have a medical condition?

NNEKA
(Her voice cracking)
Sir, I... I don't...

PRRRRT. PRRRRRRRRR-ACK-PRT.
It's a rhythmic, wet, and violent series of sounds. Nneka's face is a mask of pure, unadulterated horror. She can no longer even pretend to speak.

MR. OKORO
(Standing up quickly, picking up his briefcase)

I believe I have seen enough. Poise was the primary requirement, Mrs. Joyce. I cannot recommend a candidate who cannot... govern her own physical presence.

JOYCE
(Standing up, desperate)
Mr. Okoro! Please! This is not like her! It’s the wine! Or maybe Zara did something! Zara!

MR. OKORO
(Backing toward the door)
Regardless of the cause, the University cannot take such a risk. I have other interviews to attend. Good day.

He exits, the front door clicking shut with a finality that echoes through the room.

NNEKA
(Collapsing into a howl of tears)
Mom! I couldn't stop it! I felt like I was exploding!

JOYCE
(Looking around the room in a frenzy, her eyes landing on the kitchen hallway)
Zara! ZARA! Come out here! You did this! You put something in her drink! You are a devil! You’ve ruined your sister’s life because of your jealousy!

Joyce is fuming.

INT. ZARA’S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The house is quiet, but the air still feels heavy with the afternoon’s humiliation. Zara is sitting on her bed. Her phone vibrates. **ANON.**

ZARA

(Answering)
Hello.

ANON (V.O.)
I trust the "ambassador" was impressed?

ZARA
(A cold, small smile)
He left within ten minutes. My mother spent the last four hours screaming at me, accusing me of witchcraft and poisoning. She’s currently in Nneka’s room, trying to "pray".

ANON (V.O.)
(A dark, melodic laugh)
Let her pray. Prayer won't fix a broken reputation. You’ve taken their pride, Zara. You’ve turned the "perfect" home into a joke.

ZARA
Nneka is devastated. She won't even look at me.

ANON (V.O.)
(Voice turning serious)
Good. But remember, a cornered animal is the most dangerous. Your mother still thinks she can shout you into submission. She hasn't realized that the power has shifted.

ZARA
What’s the next move?

ANON (V.O.)
(Pacing his words carefully)
We are moving past the games. You’ve broken their spirit. Now, we break their reality. I want you to go to the lakeside tomorrow. We need to discuss the final instruction. The one that ends this once and for all.

FADE OUT.

SCENE 27

EXT. LAKESIDE - DAY

The water is still, reflecting a pale, hazy sky. **ZARA** sits on a flat rock at the edge of the bank. She looks different. The slump in her shoulders is gone. She holds a leather-bound journal, writing with a steady, rhythmic hand.

ZARA (V.O.)
I used to think that being invisible was a curse. I spent years trying to shrink so small that their words wouldn't hit me. But Anon showed me that being invisible is actually a superpower. You can see everything when people think you aren't there. The mischief... the look on Nneka's face when she lost that scholarship... it wasn't just fun. It was justice. I'm not the shy girl who hides in the kitchen anymore. I feel strong. I feel like I can't be broken. I feel invincible.

A sharp **PING** comes from her pocket. She pulls out her phone. It's a notification from Discord.

ON SCREEN:

AKUME: Zara. Are you there?

ZARA: How did you find my Discord?

AKUME: That doesn't matter. Listen to me carefully. You need to block Anon. Right now. Delete your chat history and stop talking to him. He is dangerous.

Zara's grip on the phone tightens. She types back.

ZARA: Dangerous? He's the only person who actually hears me. How do you even know I'm talking to him?

AKUME: It's just a hunch. He's using you.

ZARA: A hunch? You're lying. You're a hacker, aren't you? You've been into my phone. You've been watching me.

AKUME: I'm trying to protect you.

ZARA: The only way you'd know is if you hacked me or if he told you. And he wouldn't tell you. I trust him. He doesn't keep secrets from me.

AKUME: How can you trust someone you've never even seen? Someone who only exists as a string of text on a screen? You don't know who he is, Zara.

Zara stares at the screen, her chest heaving. She feels a surge of hot, prickly anger.

ZARA: I know him better than I know you. Goodbye, Akume.

She taps the screen aggressively. **BLOCK USER.**

She looks at Anon's profile. She hits the call button. It rings. And rings. And rings. She hisses through her teeth and tosses the phone onto the rock. She stands up and looks at the sky, her jaw set, burning with a cold, lonely fire.

SCENE 28

EXT. COMPOUND PATIO - LATER

The sun is beginning to set, casting long, orange shadows across the interlocking stones. **JOYCE** and **NNEKA** are sitting at the garden table. Nneka has a cold compress on her forehead, looking exhausted.

NNEKA
(Voice thin)
Mom. Mr. Okoro's face... the way he looked at me like I was something he found on the bottom of his shoe. My scholarship is gone. My reputation is finished.

JOYCE
(Sighing)
I've prayed until my voice is gone, Nneka. First the oil, then the snake, then the gate... it's like a cloud has settled over this house. It's mysterious. It's like the ground itself is cursed.

NNEKA
(Looking toward the house)

It’s not the ground, Mom. It’s Zara. I have a hunch. All these "accidents" started happening when she stopped crying and started acting... quiet. She’s behind this. I know it.

JOYCE
She doesn't have the brains for this kind of mischief. She’s just a bitter girl.

The front gate creaks open. **ZARA** walks in. She has large headphones over her ears, her eyes fixed straight ahead. She looks upset, her face tight.

JOYCE
Zara! Zara, come here! I am talking to you!

Zara doesn't even turn her head. She keeps walking toward the front door.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
(Standing up)
Do you see this? The level of arrogance? Zara!

Zara continues to ignore her. Nneka stands up and jogs across the pavement, catching Zara by the arm and yanking the headphones down around her neck.

NNEKA
My mother is talking to you! Have you lost your mind? Answer her!

Zara stops. She looks at Nneka’s hand on her arm, then looks Nneka in the eye. Without a word, Zara swings her hand.

WHACK.
The slap is so hard it echoes off the compound walls. Nneka’s head snaps to the side.

JOYCE
(Gasping)
Zara! What have you done?

NNEKA
(Screaming)
You witch!

Nneka lunges at Zara, grabbing her hair. They collide, stumbling onto the grass. Joyce rushes over, trying to pull them apart, but she’s swinging her arms wildly, hitting Zara’s shoulders.

JOYCE
Stop it! You are behaving like animals!

Zara’s rage breaks cover. She shoves Nneka off her with a strength that seems impossible. She plants a foot on Nneka’s chest, pinning her down, and then turns to her mother. She grabs Joyce’s wrists in a crushing grip.

ZARA
Don’t. Touch. Me.

She shoves Joyce back. Joyce hits the garden chair and falls onto the stones. Zara stands over them both, her breathing heavy, her hair a mess, looking like someone they don't recognize.

ZARA (CONT'D)
Listen to me. Both of you. Never cross my path again. Never touch me. Never speak my name. From now on, I am a ghost in this house, and you will leave me alone.

JOYCE
(Crying on the ground, pointing a finger)
You are a demon! I should have known! I wish you would just die, Zara! I wish you would just die today so I can finally have peace in my own house!

Zara flinches as if she’s been burned. Her eyes fill with a sudden, sharp pain that quickly turns back into ice. She doesn't say anything else. She turns and walks into the house, slamming the heavy mahogany door behind her.

SCENE 29

INT. ZARA’S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The only light in the room comes from the phone screen. Zara is sitting on the floor in the corner, her knees pulled to her chest.

ON SCREEN:

ZARA: She told me she wished I was dead. My own mother.

ANON: They always reveal their true nature when they lose control. They don't love you, Zara. They love the version of you that obeys. Now that you’ve fought back, you are a threat.

ZARA: I don't care anymore. I’m done with the pranks. I want them to feel the fear I’ve felt every day.

ANON: Then it’s time for the finale.

ZARA: What do I do?

ANON: You are the one who cooks for the family, right? They still eat the food you make.

ZARA: Yes.

ANON: Good. I am sending you a formula. It’s a compound that mimics a massive cardiac event. It is untraceable in a standard autopsy because it breaks down into natural salts within minutes of ingestion.

ZARA: You want me to kill her?

ANON: No. We aren't murderers, Zara. The goal is to scare her. To let her see the edge of the grave. You will give her a controlled dose. It will work instantly—less than ten minutes. She will feel her heart failing. She will feel the cold.

ZARA: Hmm

ANON: But you will hold the antidote. A small vial. When she is at her lowest, when she is begging for one more breath, you will give it to her. She will wake up knowing that her life belongs to you. She will never dare to speak a cruel word to you again.

ZARA: (Typing slowly) An antidote.

ANON: Yes. You keep it in your pocket. You stay in control. This is how you win your freedom, Zara. Are you ready to finish this?

Zara stares at the word "Freedom." She looks at the door.

ZARA: Send me the formula.

FADE OUT.

SCENE 30

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The single pendant light hums. The refrigerator kicks into a louder cycle.

ZARA (V.O.)
In Chemistry, an irreversible reaction is one where the products cannot be turned back into the reactants. Once the bond is broken, it is gone. You can’t un-burn wood. You just have to sit in the ruins and watch the smoke...rise.

ZARA sets the plates down. The sound of the ceramic hitting the wood is the only greeting. She sits.

JOYCE stares at her food. She doesn't pick up her fork. She looks at the stew as if it were a personal insult.

JOYCE

Look at the color of this. It’s dull, Zara. Just like you. I don't know how I raised a daughter who can’t even make a vibrant meal.

Zara doesn't answer. She eats a small, mechanical spoonful of rice.

JOYCE (CONT'D)
(Yelling)
Nneka! Come and eat!

Silence. Joyce clicks her tongue and looks at Zara with a sharp, sideways glance.

JOYCE (CONT’D)
See your sister? She is in there working. She is trying to salvage her life while you sit here like a log of wood. You are just a weight on me, Zara. A heavy, useless weight.

Joyce takes a large bite. She eats in a heavy, oppressive silence for three minutes. Then, she pauses. She clears her throat, her hand going to her collar.

JOYCE (CONT’D)
Why is the AC off? I’m sweating. And this rice... it’s making my throat dry. Zara, get me water.

ZARA
(Voice flat)
The AC is on, Mom.

JOYCE
(Wiping her forehead)
Don’t tell me what I feel! My throat is parched. Get me water now!

Zara stands slowly. She pours the glass and sets it on the table. Joyce gulps it down, water spilling onto her housecoat.

JOYCE (CONT’D)

(Gasping)
More. It didn't help. Get me more.

ZARA
(Softly)
Why? You just drank a whole glass.

JOYCE
(Voice turning raspy)
Because I am thirsty! Are you blind? Get—

Joyce’s hand tremors. She tries to stand, but her knees buckle. She slams back into the chair. The wood cracks. Her face turns a blotchy red.

JOYCE (CONT’D)
(Voice shaky)
Zara... my eyes. Why is it blurry? Everything is spinning. Please. Just get the water.

Zara sits back down. She doesn't reach for the glass. A single, sharp sob breaks from her throat.

ZARA
(Whimpering)
So this is what it takes? For you to actually be nice to me? To be polite?

JOYCE
(Breathing heavily)
Zara... I am... usually polite. I have never... spoken rudely...

ZARA
(A sudden, loud cry)
LIAR! You fucking liar!

Zara’s face contorts. Tears stream down her face. She leans forward, her voice thick with the weight of things unsaid for years.

ZARA (CONT’D)
(Sobbing)
I’ve had to raise myself emotionally in this house because you weren't there! Every time I shared excitement about something, you mocked

it. Every time I came home with a problem, I got a lecture instead of being heard. I learned a long time ago that home isn't a safe place to be honest, so I started hiding. No quality time. No curiosity about who I actually am. Just correction. Just Nneka.

JOYCE
(Weakly)
Zara... stop...

ZARA
(Screaming)
I won't stop! You never once told me you were proud of me without a condition attached! You never apologized when you were wrong! I've become a stranger who just happens to share your blood because of you! Whenever I achieve something, you barely look up! Whenever I cry, you call me dramatic! You just kept hitting me with your words until I turned into a ghost! I hate you! I hate you!

Zara lunges. Her hands find Joyce's neck. She is heavy and real now. She squeezes. The chair tips, and they crash to the floor. Zara stays on top, grip tightening.

JOYCE's eyes roll back. Her struggle stops. Zara stares into her mother's eyes and slowly lets go.

JOYCE
(A faint, broken whisper)
Zara... I'm... sorry...

The hitching stops. Joyce's jaw goes slack.

ZARA
(Whispering)
Mom? ...Mommy, wake up. I was just... I was just talking. Wake up!

Zara reaches into her pocket and pulls out the tiny glass bottle. She fumbles with the lid, her teeth chattering. She pours the liquid into

Joyce’s mouth, but it pools and leaks out.

ZARA (CONT’D)
(A guttural scream)
FUCK!

Zara scrambles up. She bolts toward her room, slamming the door and locking it.

SCENE 31

INT. ZARA’S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Zara is slumped on the floor, hyperventilating. Her phone glows in her hand. She calls Anon on X (Twitter), he picks up. As usual, His voice is electronically masked, lowered into a mechanical drone with a deep tone.

Zara sobs.

ZARA
I killed her. She’s dead on the floor. I tried the antidote, but she didn't wake up. Anon, what do I do? I’m scared.

ANON
Good. Your problem is over now.

ZARA
NO! I feel sick. I thought this would make me feel better, but I feel worse. I feel like my heart is made of lead.

ANON
That is the weight of freedom. You’ll get used to it. I killed both my parents years ago. They had to die for me to live.

ZARA
(Yells)
I don't care! Help me! The police... Nneka is in the other room!

She burst into more tears, Anon waits, then continues.

ANON
Zara, do you believe in the after life?

ZARA
Yes. Why?

ANON
Then there is a way out. Take the main bottle. Drink it. All of it.

ZARA
(Hand trembling over the bottle)
No. Anon, I can't. I'm scared. I don't want to die. I’m only twenty-four.

ANON
And what is left for a twenty-four-year-old murderer? The police will be here. Nneka will walk out and see her. She will look at you and see a monster. Do you want that?

ZARA
(Sobbing)
No... but maybe I can just run away?

ANON
To where? You’re a "ghost," Zara. You have no one. You’ve been hiding your whole life — this is just the final hiding spot.

ZARA
I don't want to. I'm terrified. Please.

ANON
Think about it. In the afterlife, there is no Nneka. There is no comparison. You can go there and see your mom. She’ll be the version you wanted. She’ll finally be proud of you for having the guts to do this. Don't you want to hear her say she's proud?

ZARA
(Looking at the bottle)
It'll hurt.

ANON
It won't. It’s a chemical sleep. It’s the only way to be safe, Zara. Do it now, before Nneka knocks. Do it so you can finally have the peace you’ve been raising yourself for.

ZARA
(slowly)
Are you sure?

ANON
I am sure. It’s the only way. Do it.

Zara looks at the small bottle. She wipes her nose with her sleeve. She hears a faint sound from Nneka’s room. Her face hardens with a mask of exhaustion. She unscrews the cap and drinks it all.
She sits back. Sobbing, and after awhile, her head lolls. Her phone slips and lands face-up. The call ends.

ON SCREEN (Typing)

ANON: Zara?

ANON: Z?

USER HAS BEEN BLOCKED BY ANON.

SCENE 32

INT. NNEKA’S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

NNEKA takes off her headphones. The silence is absolute. She's sitting opposite a desktop computer.

NNEKA
Mom? Zara? Is the food ready?

She stands up and walks toward the door. She opens it and closes it.

FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 33

BLACK SCREEN

WHITE TEXT FADES IN SLOWLY, CENTERED.

"Digital predators often target vulnerable individuals in crisis, using 'shared trauma' to manipulate them into taking irreversible actions."

FADE OUT. CUT TO BLACK.

"Research indicates that 1 in 3 adolescents and young adults in emotional crisis turn to the internet for support, where they are significantly more likely to encounter harmful content or predatory 'mentors'."

FADE OUT. CUT TO BLACK.

The final text appears.

"A stranger behind a screen is never a substitute for professional help. If you are in crisis, please talk to someone who can truly help you. STAY SAFE."

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END.